



Samuel J. Tolbert Jr.\*

## THE ROLE OF ECUMENICAL LEADERSHIP IN POVERTY AND PUBLIC POLICY

The church and its leadership continue to be prominent stakeholders in the war on poverty. From the early existence of the African-American Church, ecclesiastical leaders possessed great insight regarding the economic needs of constituents. Due to their unique position in the community, clergypersons have been on the frontline battlegrounds of poverty. Ecumenical leaders and their parishioners fought this war long before faith-based initiatives and funds were popular and available. Church budgets steered limited financial resources to meet needs and close gaps in the lives of the needy. With all of this experience, religious leaders can be designated as experts in dealing with poverty-impacted persons. The key to breaking this vicious cycle is rooted in local minds and resources. Our congregations have numerous gifted people with skills that need to be utilized in order to attack rampart poverty in our communities and throughout the world. For many destitute people, the minister provides leadership for the most important institution in the African-American community. In our communities, the pastor serves as the voice for the voiceless (often underrepresented, uninformed, and unlearned.) Poverty and its effects are integral parts of the African-American community and the church.

In certain communities, public policy comes in different

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forms and wears various masks. According to Bryson and Crosby,<sup>1</sup> it is comprised of decisions, commitments, and actions made by those who hold or affect government positions of authority as interpreted by various stakeholders. It includes government expressed intentions, official enactments, and consistent patterns of activities. There are various reasons for public policies: economic changes, demographic trends, and ideological trends. However, one must remember that the key factor in shaping public policy is power. Therefore, in the African-American paradigm, one must explore the community's landscape for the necessary commodities that determine public policy.

Overwhelmingly, through didactic discourse and empirical studies grounded within the framework of African-American social structure, there is a significant correlation existing among policy, power, and the church. Ironically, in our community, policy may be substituted for the word "empowerment." The ecumenical leaders of our country may impact public policy by advocating child care as one of the most effective ways to improve school/job performance and adult productivity. These achievements loosen poverty's grip on our communities.

Productive citizens are the answers to our current and future poverty problems. One key approach must focus on its financial roots. The church must develop dialogue with those in public-policy positions to promote micro-enterprise development programs, which have an overall goal of ending dependence of needy parents on government benefits—promoting job preparation, work, and marriage. They are prepared to dream and make their dreams realities, opening and growing their own business through enhancing their access to business capital,

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<sup>1</sup>See John M. Bryson and Barbra C. Crosby, *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-power World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publications, 1992).

technical assistance, and training.

We must wake up the sleeping giant—the church—so that she may address this social issue of poverty in a more collective and intentional manner. Too many are living on the margins of life. Many of our congregants are not aware of the high level of poverty prevalent in America. This lack of education results in persons remaining insensitive to this hardship concern. By leveraging resources we can expedite solutions, actions, and strategies in combating poverty; our involved ecumenical leadership can meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the opportunity for future ones.

The economic livelihood of the Black minister is primarily rooted and supported by the African-American community. No other individual wields such powerful influence. Black clergy are uniquely qualified as catalysts for decision-making. Leaders do not take this responsibility lightly. It is critical that the clergypersons' experience and influence shape the consciousness of congregants, resulting in their becoming more enlightened, empowered, and economically gifted. Only then, will ministers be able to critically evaluate their role and give a positive response to these familiar biblical passages:

- Am I my brother's keeper?
- Whatsoever you have done unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto Jesus.
- Have I given all that is required? (To whom much is given, much is required.)

